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Betrayal of children

Marriage law change will cater to desire of adults

By Bishop Fred Henry

In the debate relative to redefining the nature of marriage, the young Liberals at the last Liberal policy convention came up with a lapel button: "It's the Charter, stupid!"

Some Conservatives at their convention responded with a button that read: "It's the stupid Charter!"

I would suggest that we need a third button -- "It's about children, stupid!"

The most overlooked and disenfranchised group in the current debate about marriage are children. According to the government's agenda, Bill C-38, the social institution that has always symbolized our society's commitment to the future -- our children, will be transformed into an institution that symbolizes our commitment to the present -- the needs and desires of adults.

Marriage will have a new primary purpose, to validate and protect sexually intimate adult relationships.

Legislation which redefines marriage cannot achieve the impossible.

It cannot alter the simple reality that there is a fundamental difference between a relationship that, by its nature, has the potential to create a child and a relationship, that by its nature, absolutely does not.

The proposed re-invention of the institution of marriage means that marriage must be disconnected from procreation, and the traditional family, the only institution that honours a child's natural right to know and be cared for by his or her parents, must be dismantled.

This will effectively make children's rights secondary to adults and turn on its head the ethical principle that children, as the most vulnerable people, must come first.

Some advocates of same-sex marriage try to argue that children would be better off with good gay parents than with bad straight ones -- even though comparing the best of one thing with the worst of another makes no sense.

Given that stable and exclusive homosexual coupling is the exception rather than the norm, to connect homosexual coupling with children's welfare or with a stable environment for children is nothing if not dishonest.

The issue is not whether traditional marriage, as it stands, is a perfect institution, but whether society and especially children are better off with it than without.

Even if we concede that the social-science evidence is sometimes ambiguous, we know that two parents are better for children than one.

Families with both mothers and fathers are generally better for children than those with only mothers or only fathers. Biological parents usually protect and provide for their children more effectively than non-biological ones.

That these facts are either ignored or trivialized by some advocates of gay marriage says something about concern for children in our society.

Prior to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, human rights standards applicable to all members of the human family had been expressed in legal instruments such as covenants, conventions and declarations, as did standards relating to the specific concerns of children.

But it was only in 1989 that the standards concerning children were brought together in a single legal instrument, approved by the international community and spelling out in an unequivocal manner the rights to which every child is entitled, regardless of where born or to whom, regardless of sex, religion, or social origin.

The body of rights enumerated in the Convention are the rights of children everywhere.

In the preamble and in article 5, article 10 and article 18, the Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically refers to the family as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of its members, particularly children.

Under the Convention, States are obliged to respect parents' primary responsibility for providing care and guidance for their children and support parents in this regard, providing material assistance and support.

States are also obliged to prevent children from being separated from their families unless the separation is judged necessary for the child's best interests. They shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child.

Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.

Children need and have a right to both a mother and a father and a right to be reared by their own biological parents. There is a deep human need to be connected to our origins.

Restricting marriage to the union of a man and a woman establishes that right of children as the societal norm.

In other words, it is a fundamental purpose of marriage to give children both a mother and a father, preferably their own biological parents. Changing the definition of marriage to include same sex couples would openly and directly contravene both the right and the norm and would mean marriage could no longer function to affirm the biological bond between parents and their children.

When there is a conflict between what adults want and what children need, who should be given priority?